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ABSTRACT

The conventional way of thinking about politics keeps us from studying the important work that citizens must do to achieve political efficacy. Students learn the procedures of government as if politics were a spectator sport. While everyone learns about the politics of government, there is little discussion about the politics of the public. Unless people are capable of doing the things that public politics require, they cannot effectively participate in the political life of the country. The core of political work is dealing with uncertainties--not about facts, but about the goals and purposes of government. Judgments are required when decisions are made without certainty and everything depends upon their quality. The purpose of judgment is to capture political realities through reflection and deliberation, not impression. Developing public judgment requires the integration of diverse points of view. In forming public judgments people must spend considerable time assessing the interrelations of their many interests and the long-term consequences of their policy options. It demands deliberation and reflection on experiences. In a democracy citizens need to be able to talk together in order to think together, to explore together, to compare, to synthesize. If public politics require such skills, surely the central task of a civic educator is to teach them. Direct experience in public work seems to be essential to learning public skills. Based on what the future is likely to require of politics, there is an educational imperative in sorting out what tasks are required in a diverse nation and even more diverse world. (GEA)

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Citizenship for the 21st Century
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Keynote Address:
Dr. David Mathews
President, Kettering Foundation

Teaching Politics as Public Work: An Alternative Theory of Civic Education

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As a research foundation, Kettering has been working for quite some time in the field that brings us here: civic education. We sometimes call it political education, but we don't mean by politics what is normally meant—things that politicians do. We mean by politics what the Greeks meant—those things that have to do with all of our common life as a political community—a polity.

But why is there a problem for any of us over civic or political education? I can't think of anybody saying, "We are against educating young people to be good citizens." Certainly, there are some who are not interested in citizenship—or don't take it seriously. But there isn't a problem with powerful groups trying to stop civic educators. Even so, we can't have the kind of civic education we want. Why? What are the real obstacles? My guess is that the conventional way we have of thinking about politics keeps us from fastening on the work that citizens have to do in politics. And that, in turn, impoverishes our concept of civic or political education.

The Conventional Political Wisdom

There is, indeed, a powerfully persuasive concept of politics that children learn from the dinner table and the television set long before they ever enter school. Everybody knows how our political system works. Talk to any community in the country, to any

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college group, to any assembly of high school students, to any collection of U.S. Senators and you will get exactly the same story. Everybody knows how our version of democracy really works.

It's very simple. We're organized into interest groups which compete with one another in a political arena that is like a marketplace with all kinds of competition and transactions. Some of the interest groups are able to amass a majority, get legislation passed and candidates elected because of their skill in manipulating the public and the media. The function of government is to adjudicate this competition and distribute resources as dictated by the outcomes. Everybody knows that. And it's true. That's the way part of politics works.

But for those of us who are interested in teaching democratic citizenship there is a serious problem in this concept of politics. There is practically nothing to teach. In your material, you have a section criticizing teaching civics as procedures of government. Good! But why do we teach procedures of government—the way a law is passed? The answers seem obvious. If politics is nothing but self-interest, how could anyone teach you your own self-interest? And if the activities of politics are really the down-in-the-trenches, pull and tug of factions—transactions, deals, manipulations—who would ever think of going to school to learn such practical matters? So why do we teach politics like it was a spectator sport? Because with politics understood as self-interested transactions, about all that's left to teach is how to keep score on government.

Another Concept of Politics: The Public's Work

Of course, part of politics does have to do with transactions among interest groups. If you want to influence the government, if you want to get a bill passed, if you want to get a candidate elected, the conventional model of politics that everyone knows about can be useful.

But the problem is not the politics we always hear about. The problem is that there is a part of politics we never hear about. While we talk every day about the politics of government, we rarely talk about the politics of the public. Yet without the public doing its work, government can't do its job.

There are some things that governments—even if they are working perfectly and run by angels—can never do. No government can create its own legitimacy. No government can create commonality. That is, governments can build common highways, but they cannot build common ground. Neither can governments create political will. The government can encourage us not to smoke and encourage us to vote. Governments can even dominate a society. But no government can generate the political will that comes up from the grassroots.

Finally, no government, not even the very best government, can create citizens. Some of you know that the Kettering Foundation has an international as well as a domestic program. From it came a surprising illustration of this point. During our last round of the Dartmouth Conferences with the Soviets, a political philosopher named Murab Mamardashvily commented on something that would seldom occur to an American. The Soviets are trying to write a constitution with stronger laws about personal rights and responsibilities. But, he said, our problem is that we can't have a constitution without citizens. In other words, people cannot live by an abstract set of principles that have no meaning in their daily lives. In order for a constitution about the rights of citizens to be meaningful, there have to be people who live the lives of citizens everyday.

Is there anybody who can imagine a political system operating without commonality, common ground, political will and citizens? No one can. So what are the politics of getting these things done? That's the kind of politics we don't hear much about.

Other than in voting, we may not hear much about the public's role in politics these days but our history is filled with all kinds of examples of public politics—of the public at work. Recall the country's first public institutions—town meetings. These little republics, Jefferson said, gave vigor to the Revolution and later made the big Republic possible. For nearly 200 years before the Constitution, the public through countless public forums had been doing its work—the work of creating the legitimacy and purposes of a new form of government. The forums were places where people talked through the issues facing them, moving from private opinions to shared judgments. Through these experiences, truly American citizens were created—the John Adams, who learned citizenship in the best schools for democracy, the town meetings themselves.

Civic Education for Public Work

The argument that I am making about public work as the necessary basis for civic education needs to be put in the context of the already established positions on what a better civic education requires. One position, well advertised these days, is that we must have a common knowledge of our political culture—that we all have to know certain names and dates and events. And it is necessary to be as politically literate as possible—to know about the Bill of Rights and people like John Locke and Thomas Jefferson. Another argument is that we have to teach not just the facts but the values implicit in our political heritage—justice and freedom and the like. Who would argue against the value of values? Still others think of civic education as requiring direct experience in some type of helpful activity: serving in a campaign or volunteering for a community activity. Certainly politics requires experience.

All of these notions of civic education have merit. But they don't speak to the question of how to teach people to be a part of a public and develop the skills necessary for the practice of publicing. If we want to teach someone any other practical crafts, for example,

to be a carpenter, we teach the skills of carpentry: nailing and sawing. Public politics equally requires practical skills. This is the heart of the argument: unless people are capable of doing the things that public politics requires, they cannot do politics any more than people who can't saw or nail can do carpentry.

As an example, take just one of the public's responsibilities: creating and defining common purposes. One skill required for arriving at common purposes is the ability to make common judgments. Making common or public judgments is difficult. But we know what skills are required.

Judgment as a Necessary Public Skill

In public politics, one of the central problems has to do with our different views of reality and our varied beliefs about what our communities ought to be. Reconciling these differences requires more than finding out what the facts are. Make no mistakes, facts are essential. But facts have different meanings to different people. What's more, specific facts don't give us a sense of the whole, of the connections and relationships that have to be understood in politics. And even when we know the facts as best we can, we still have to make the choices that politics requires. We have to consider more than just the facts about what is happening in our communities; we have to consider what ought to happen. In effect, we have to move beyond the realm of knowledge and enter the moral or ethical realm.

It's not enough to have a vague sense of what a community should be like—that justice is better than injustice, that equity is better than inequity, and so on. In any given political situation, we have to be specific. We have to sort out how general principles fit particular cases. For example, should we close the school in the south of town? Is it more equitable that the children in that section have access to a central school or does the principle of equity mean that each part of town should have its own school? The core of political work

is dealing with such uncertainty—not about the facts but about what ought to be. The awful dilemma of politics is that we have to decide even when we can never be certain.

When we can't know for certain, we opine. We say what we believe to be the case. Politics is very dependent on opining—on opinions. So the quality of opinions is crucial. What's important is how reflective and representative they are; that is, whether they are based on individual, first impressions or more considered and shared second thoughts, which might be called "judgments."

Judgment can be most fully understood if we think about it in relation to the quintessence of politics—uncertainty. Judgment is required most precisely when we don't have the luxury of certainty. We call on judgment most when we must deal with questions that can never be answered by logic and knowledge alone. We may know all the facts about MX missiles, but whether they are a wise investment of public funds depends on consideration that go beyond the facts. For example, does national security require superior strength or deterrence? Or would we be better off in isolation? Everything depends on how good our judgments are on such questions.

Unfortunately, opinion, as we see it in polls, is time-bound. It is like a snapshot of an avalanche. Judgment, on the other hand, is the product of reflection and deliberation not impression. It has, therefore, to be continuous, constantly adjusting itself as new perspectives are added to old ones. The purpose of judgment is to capture political realities never revealed in a snapshot.

There's another difference between forming individual opinions about particular issues and developing the capacity for shared or public judgment in a community. It is a critical difference which reveals the nature of the work involved in making judgments. Public judgment differs from mass opinion most in that it requires the integration rather than the aggregation of diverse points of view. As communities think and reflect together, as they

begin to sort out their values and work through the choices before them, they develop new perspectives. By seeing things from more than one side, people see the whole differently.

For example, if a tornado had just ripped through town, the best way we could assess the damage would be to get together several who would survey various parts of town and then return to discuss what they had seen and learned. Any single story would give an inaccurate description, since a tornado would leave some areas untouched while demolishing others. By sharing our perceptions together, we would find out the extent of the damage and perhaps even the tornado's path. In essence, we could see the storm as a whole.

While we've talked about the nature of public judgments, we haven't yet addressed how we should go about developing them. In order to form public judgments, people have to spend considerable time assessing the interrelations of their many interests and the long-term consequences of their policy options. They have to reflect on their experiences and deliberate over their choices. Being individually bright and logical is not enough.

Public judgment is comparable to artistic judgment. In neither case are there hard and fast rules of logic to follow. But in both cases, judgment can be informed and developed. To develop public judgments, we have to deliberate and reflect on our experience. That requires an array of intellectual skills, mental attitudes, and powers of imagination. In a democracy—not the group think of a collective mentality—we have to be able to compare our diverse perspectives and values. And we do that through public dialogue. A dialogue forces us to compare one perspective with another. And comparisons begin the process of synthesis, fitting individual perspectives together to arrive at a new, integrated sense of the whole.

In short, in a democracy we need the skill to be able to talk together in order to think together. Public thinking is not just analytical and logical; it requires us to explore

together, to compare, to synthesize. If public politics requires such skills, surely the central task of a civic educator is to teach them. A student does not have to wait to be an adult to be part of the public dialogue, to learn to think with others, to learn how to make judgments about common purposes. Those of you who have adapted the National Issues Forums to the classroom, which are exercises in forming public judgments, report that students readily join in a national forum. And there is evidence from the use of these exercises that this kind of experience makes it easier for students to understand the concepts and values of our political culture. Not any experience, but a direct experience in doing public work, seems to be essential to learning public skills.

Public Politics and the Future

The conventional model of politics was described earlier as a model for making decisions about the distribution of political "goods," for deciding who gets what, who wins and who loses. It is a politics for dividing pies. But what if there isn't a pie available to be divided? What if the political issue is whether there is enough common interest to make a pie? Increasingly, conventional politics is not all that useful because there isn't any pie to divide. In some of our inner cities the question of who wins and loses is irrelevant because so many people have already lost. Even in international affairs we are now dealing with a set of questions in which there is a prospect, not for some winners and some losers, but for total loss. Who are the winners in nuclear war? The more fundamental question is whether there is enough common interest in finding alternatives.

The most basic political questions domestically and internationally are such questions of commonality. Is there a community of interests among us? Simply because we are in a common geographic boundary and a political area called a state does not mean that we are in a political community. And certainly sharing a planet together doesn't guarantee common interests. Yet the conventional politics of distribution suggests that a community

of interests—a pie—already exists and that all we have to do is cut it up. So in conventional politics we spend a lot of time sharpening our knives. But if there is no pie, all we are likely to do with sharp knives is cut ourselves.

My guess is that the next generation is going to have to deal with questions of commonality not just questions about the distribution of preexisting goods. That means the politics of transaction is going to have to give way to the politics of transformation. Why? Because a community of interests has to be created. People don't bump into one another and suddenly discover common interests in the way they discover common ancestors. Common interests are not self-evident. They don't begin to exist until people, through their sharing, create them.

For me, thinking about what work the public has to do instructs my understanding of what civic education has to do. But that is more than a dispassionate "academic" conclusion. Based on what I sense the future will require of politics, there is an educational imperative in sorting out what tasks, like creating common ground, are required in a diverse nation and even more diverse world.